

Brian Vincent Street



Brian Street, who gave the opening keynote speech at last year's UKLA International Conference in Bristol, has died aged 73. Kate Pahl writes:

Brian was Professor Emeritus of Language and Literacy at King's College, London. From

his work stemmed a body of work that became known as the 'New Literacy Studies'. This, and in particular the idea that all literacy practices were ideologically constructed, had a lasting influence on how literacy was understood, leading to a fundamental re-thinking of the ways in which research in literacy has been undertaken. Brian's ideas enabled a generation of researchers to value 'local' literacies as being equally 'valid' and important to 'school' or 'academic' literacies: different but not inferior.

Brian wrote and edited many books in this field, including *Social Literacies* (1995) and *Cross Cultural Approaches*

to Literacy (1993). Many of his books were collectively created and produced: *Exploring the Everyday: Ethnographic Approaches to Literacy and Numeracy* (2007), a small book published by the 'Nirantar' collective of literacy teachers in Nepal, for example. In it adult literacy educators identified and recorded the plethora of everyday literacies around them, from complex notations on walls regarding health checks to inscriptions within homes in multiple languages and scripts. Recognising and crediting this process of researching local literacy practices was typical of Brian's deep egalitarianism. As his daughter, Alice Street, said in his obituary, 'Brian never took on the mantle of academic superiority'.

Brian was deeply attentive to issues of power and also how things could be framed differently through an anthropological lens. When I was a student of Brian's we would sit in his room overlooking the River Thames, opposite the Houses of Parliament. It helped, said Brian, to regard the goings on there as

being merely 'local practice', a perspective that helped him get through many meetings.

Brian taught at Sussex University in the School of Anthropology and subsequently took up a Chair in Education at King's College London. He was generous with his time and energy. Brian had the capacity to include you in his life, and he had a wide circle of friends and colleagues. He combined immense humility with an intensely social outlook that was egalitarian, generous and warm. He retained this great sense of kinship with others throughout his life.

Brian's influence on the field of literacy is immense – he generated nearly a half century of thinking. He never encouraged academics to sit still but to move and to change, always questioning and always focused on the everyday as much as the local and the particular. In this article, written in 1997, he says,

Advocates of the NLS may have felt that their approach has meant going against

the grain, challenging dominant 'ways of knowing' (Baker et al., 1996): but it may be that the grain is not simply that of a 'dominant' society with which they can feel romantically in conflict but that of their own deepest desires and fears. We all have to live with the psychological and social consequences of the new theories. (Street 1997:52).

Thank-you, Brian, for the gift of these theories, for the generosity of your scholarship and your persistent belief in the importance of everybody's gaze on what literacy is and what it could be.

References

Nirantar (Ed) (2007) *Exploring the Everyday: Ethnographic Approaches to Literacy and Numeracy*. New Delhi: Nirantar.

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